

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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MAKING WORDS PLAY DOUBLE

ONE of the great forces recognized today, not only by psychologists, but by business men as well, is "suggestion." The salesman regards it as his most potent aid in "landing" prospects. The advertising specialist employs it in every conceivable manner. It is the tool of the diplomat, the statesman, the physician, the lawyer, the executive, the artisan, and especially of the writer.

To define it briefly, suggestion consists in cleverly contrived statements or other devices that convey a meaning more complete than appears on the surface.

The advertising specialist, for example, displays a line reading: "Warm breezes lure you to Florida." The words call up pictures of the steps necessary to reach the land of warm breezes—buying a railroad ticket, boarding a train, securing hotel accommodations, etc. A pictured representation of one of these steps may be deftly employed to augment the force of the printed words. The trip may be so vividly suggested that it becomes a moving purpose in the mind of the reader.

The characteristic drawings of E. Coles Phillips, familiar to even casual magazine readers, illustrate the use of suggestion through another medium. The artist contrives a background of some flat color, against which he draws in detail, perhaps, a mass of golden hair, a glimpse of rounded shoulders and arms, and a shapely stockinged limb.

The beholder sees not merely these details but the entire figure they suggest.

No less potent is suggestion in the hands of a skilled fiction writer. The proper words and allusions, as chosen by a master hand, may crowd a 1000-word story as full of ideas and pictures as many a long novel.

Suppose we make this clearer by illustration. The following excerpt is from a story by William Hamilton Osborne published some months ago in McCall's Magazine.

Entered as second-class matter April 21, 1916, at the post office at Denver, Colo.
Single copies 5 cents. Foreign subscriptions 75 cents; 3 years \$1.50.

For one reason only, Perry Churchill found himself acutely interested in the order of events, as he sat with Lottie Bellers in the darkest corner of the Trocadero Theater.

Startling things were happening on the screen. Two men staggered into a dugout bearing another, dreadfully wounded, between them. To Perry Churchill the face of the third man was a familiar face—his name a familiar name. He was Dan Delatour—alias, in this particular instance, Dick Steele of the Foreign Legion. Though blood was streaming from a gash in his forehead and wounds in his chest and his arms, the hero fumbled in his pocket and produced a photograph. He held it toward his companions, who glanced at it respectfully. A close-up showed it to be the picture of a sweet-faced old lady with gray hair.

A caption spoke for Dick Steele:

"When you get home, boys, seek her out. Say that her son died a hero, that his last thought was of her. She's my little mother, boys, the best little mother in the world."

Perry Churchill felt a pressure against his right arm. Lottie Bellers sniffled a bit and mopped her eyes.

"I'm crazy about Dan Delatour," she whispered, "crazy about him." Then she added delicately, "I like everything he does—he reminds me a whole lot of you." But Perry was unmoved.

Another caption flashed: "He still lives." Perry unconsciously repeated it. Yes, Dick Steele still lived! What is more, he got home safe and sound—he reached his mother's side just as she was handing over all her money to a slick pair, selling mining stock.

Dick Steele retrieved the money, drove the swindlers from the house, and clasped his mother in his arms. Then he told her over and over again, with a persistence that chilled Perry Churchill's blood, that she was the finest little mother in the world.

"Little! Five feet ten if she's an inch," said Perry, then added disgustedly, "I can't seem to get all this mother-an'-son stuff."

This passage is *not* suggestive. That is to say, it leaves little to the imagination. All that the author wishes the reader to know he states in so many words.

Assume, however, that we are pressed for space. We are anxious to "get across" the same facts, but are unwilling to devote some 350 words to them.

The power of suggestion comes to our aid in this emergency. Instead of describing the photoplay, we suggest it and other essential details, thus:

For one reason only, Perry Churchill found himself acutely interested in the order of events as he sat in the darkest corner of the Trocadero Theater. He felt a pressure against his right arm. Lottie Bellers sniffled a bit and mopped her eyes.

"I'm crazy about Dan Delatour," she whispered. "I like everything he does—he reminds me a whole lot of you."

But Perry was unmoved. "I can't seem to get all this mother-an'-son stuff," he said disgustedly.

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Observe that Perry's comment in itself immediately informs the reader concerning the type of picture he has been watching, even though it is not accompanied by the synopsis that was featured in the longer version. Observe that, although no direct statement to such effect is made, the reader is informed that Dan Delatour is the actor featured in the play. Observe that we "get across" by inference the fact that Perry was sitting beside Lottie in the theater.

The question naturally arises: Why employ 350 words to express ideas that can be adequately suggested in eighty? Similar questions frequently arise in the mind of the editor who is asked to pass upon wordy submitted narratives.

There is no intention here to reflect upon the technique of the Osborne story. The author may have had good reasons, in this particular passage, for giving the facts in full detail as he has done.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which suggestion may be effectively employed by the writer.

Its first use is to inform the reader about essential details without actually setting them forth in so many words. The eighty-word version of the Osborne story, already employed for illustration, involves such use of suggestion. It might be termed the "short-cut" method. It enables us to "get on" with the story rapidly and avoids the dullness that would result from devoting space to minor but essential details.

In the second use, suggestion is employed not as a word-saver, but simply to avoid the flat-footed statement of facts. It casts a glamour around an idea by clothing it in words that mean more than they seem to signify. The double entendre is a characteristic example. This form of suggestion is employed to give subtlety, sophistication and variety to style. It might be termed the "clever" method.

For an example, take this sketch from *The Smart Set*, a magazine which, in its effort toward ultra-sophistication, especially "runs" to such material:

He was a perfect Roman soldier. His armour was polished to a state of mirror-like perfection. His helmet glittered as he turned his head. His spear, and short naked sword, both looked dangerously serviceable. From beneath the skirt of his tunic, his bare, muscular legs gave every evidence of sturdiness and power.

Especially where, below each knee, there yet remained the impression of his elastic garters.

Naturally it is more effective to introduce one incongruous fact from which the reader can deduce that the Roman soldier was not a Roman soldier than to conclude with some such explanatory note as, "But really he was only an actor."

Apparently banal remarks that convey very pointed meanings come within this classification. For example, the following:

"You remember how Bill Jones used to brag that he could whip anything in the county?"

"Yes, what became of him?"

"He tackled a steam threshing machine a couple of months ago."

"How did he come out?"

"Well, the boys are raising a fund to provide a monument for him."

While such effects are not to be classed with those representing a high order of wit, nevertheless they may be mirth-provoking. They form the greater part of what passes for humor on the vaudeville stage. Whatever claims for humor the illustration possesses are due solely to the fact that it is inferred but not stated that Jones lost his life in the battle with the threshing machine.

So greatly have many of these double entendres appealed to the popular mind that they have become current idiom. To this class belong such expressions as:

"She wore a diamond on the little finger of her left hand."

"Perkins was brought before Judge Smith and given thirty days' board at the expense of the county."

"John received his sheepskin from Blank University."

Slang words and expressions, such as "Me for the tall timber," "I'm going to hit the hay," "nose paint," and the like, appeal by reason of suggesting something that the words, taken literally, do not mean. They are metaphorical vulgarisms.

But suggestion, either in its clever or its short-cut use, is by no means confined to a low order of wit. It is an enlivening factor wherever found, though naturally it must be used with discretion.

Further examples may be quoted at random from various sources, the implication being that, after the student has grasped the principle, he or she may gain an added touch of brilliancy of style, may liven up that story or essay, by judiciously employing similar methods of making words do double duty.

The following example is from "The Cipher of Death," by Robert W. Sneddon, in the April Telling Tales:

As he paused at the crossing to light a cigarette, he wheeled around apprehensively. Someone had tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Oh, it is you," he said sharply. "How long have you been following me?"

The woman threw back her head and laughed.

"What do you want?" he repeated, stepping back.

She met his bloodshot eyes with a curious air of defiance.

"To speak to you. Oh, you have nothing to fear from me. I am not one of those women who resort to a vial of vitriol."

Monsieur Fusier withdrew the hand he had slipped into his pocket and exhaled a long puff of smoke.

This may be classed as a "short-cut" example. The reader learns a great deal, by implication, from the statement of the woman that she is not one of those who resort to a vial of vitriol. The

statement implies that she knows the man and that he knows her—that he probably has wronged her—that the wrong is so keen that she would have felt justified in severely injuring him. All these ideas the mere mention of “a vial of vitriol” calls up in the reader’s mind.

Incidentally, the woman’s remark, “Oh, you have nothing to fear from me,” tells us that the man must have drawn back apprehensively. A less skillful author would have stated this fact—unnecessarily, because it is suggested by the woman’s comment.

The ending of the following, of course, implies a great deal more than is actually told the reader:

He dismissed the chauffeur at El Paso’s most sumptuous hotel. Preceded by a flock of bell-boys he entered with the air of one accustomed to the utmost in service. He confirmed the impression by taking the most expensive suite.

“Yes, he was just a tourist. He expected to move on in a week. Junior member of a firm of New York diamond importers! He was

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"References?"

"Oh, yes, the cashier of his hotel. He would say that the purchaser's standing was excellent. Junior member of a large New York firm with \$10,000 on deposit."

The fourth evening he heaved a sigh of relief as he stepped off a train well over the Mexican border. The diamonds in his pocket were worth half a million at the very least.

The following is quoted from memory and may not be an accurate presentation of the sketch that appeared in *The Smart Set*, but it illustrates an effect obtained through the use of words that mean more than they say:

The guests were assembled in the drawing room. Suddenly the music was interrupted by the butler's announcement: "Your husband, madam."

The hostess left her guests excitedly. A few minutes later, pale but calmer, she rejoined the company and announced: "My husband just returned unexpectedly from a long absence. He will be down shortly."

The guests gravitated toward the stairway. In excited gurgles, emotional women gushingly told the hostess how delighted they would be to meet her husband. When fifteen minutes had elapsed—the suspense was torturing—some of the guests exclaimed: "Why, what keeps him?"

They did not know how long it takes to file a ball and chain from one's leg.

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Old Grandfather Frog stopped and looked sadly at a foolish green fly coming his way. "Chug-arum," said Grandfather Frog, opening his mouth very wide and hopping up in the air. When he sat down again on his big lily pad the green fly was nowhere to be seen. Grandfather Frog smacked his lips.

(To be continued)

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